

Compton-Bowen House
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Front Street
Mauricetown
Cumberland County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1195

HABS
NJ
6-MAUR,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

COMPTON-BOWEN HOUSE

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Location: Front Street, Mauricetown, Cumberland County, New Jersey

Significance: This well-preserved dwelling was erected on the Maurice River by Ichabod Compton, a descendant of the town founder, in the early nineteenth century. It was vastly rebuilt--probably in the early 1880s, after which it was occupied by two residents, one a sea captain who lived there in 1883. The remodeled Second Empire styling is in excellent condition and reflects the prosperity of the local maritime community as well as related indigenous skills and products such as architectural woodwork and cast iron.

Description: This Second Empire double-house is essentially two connected residential units that are mirror images of one another--probably each organized on a side-hall plan. The overall structure is six bays wide, three stories tall, built of brick, and covered with stucco. The side facades of the main block feature two-story canted bays. A rear portion or addition to this unit is frame, though the form and features of the otherwise-twin dwellings differ here. One half of the front facade, first floor, features triple-hung two-over-two-over-two-light wood sash; these appear to have been replaced with similar modified sash (or are obscured by storm overlays) on the other half. The balance of the fenestration, excluding that of the bays, is two-over-two-light double-hung sash; the bays contain one-over-one-light double-hung sash. All openings have wood sills and lintels. The outstanding architectural character of the dwelling is its ornamentation: the slightly concave mansard roof has fishscale and diamond shingles; single and paired dormers have base scrolls and gable embellishments; the projecting molded cornices at the roofline, between the second and third floors, and on the porch feature pierced friezes; the full-width one-story front porch has decorative supports, brackets, and pendants. Side-rear porches reflect the same degree of decorative woodwork. The property is bordered on the front by an ornamental cast-iron wire fence.

History: Built ca. 1812, with additions and alterations ca. early 1880s, on the shore of the Maurice River. Prior to the 1880s, when the oyster industry boomed along the riverway, Mauricetown (pronounced Morris-town) was the largest and most active center in Commercial Township. In 1780 Luke Mattox bought land, constructed a landing, and called the area Mattox's Landing. He and others shipped cord wood and lumber from the wharves along the river. In 1814 the Compton brothers bought land here, platted out a town, sold lots and erected houses. By then it was called Mauricetown, due to its riverside location, and as such became the home to several shipyards. One of the first belonged to Joseph W. Vannaman and the captains of ocean-going schooners. The latter dealt some in the oyster trade, though they were more likely to have been associated with shipping lumber and other goods. Between 1870 and 1935, sixty-one vessels were produced here, including regionally popular shallops, sloops, and schooners.¹

In the mid to late nineteenth century, Mauricetown was known for its population of wealthy sea captains. The grandeur of their Italianate or Gothic Revival-style houses reflects the craftsmanship and lucrativeness of the industry--and the houses remain more often than not virtually intact. The most formal examples parallel the river on Front Street. These include homes such as this one, remodeled and occupied by Seth and Capt. Mason T. Bowen, and Alonzo T. Bacon, as well as that of Capt. Samuel

¹ Ruth Cook Brown, Early Shipbuilding, Particularly in South Jersey (Cumberland County Historical Society, 1961), 10.

Sharp (ca. 1860), Capt. Maurice Godfrey (ca. 1870), and Capt. Charles Sharp (ca. 1860). Today, the collection of dwellings, churches, and a school are uninterrupted by modern intrusions. Mauricetown possibly warrants listing as a National Register of Historic Places district.

Sources:

Brown, Ruth Cook. Early Shipbuilding, Particularly in South Jersey. Cumberland County Historical Society, 1961.

Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991.

Project Information: The project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian. The project was completed during summer 1992. The project historian was Kimberly R. Sebold (University of Delaware). The photography was produced by David Ames, University of Delaware, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.